

Emelia, 34

Dancer who has wrestled with anorexia nervosa for the past decade, SYDNEY

Emelia, 34, Sydney, who loves to express herself through dance, began to show signs of disordered eating, at the age of 24. Over a six months period, she shed substantial weight and her relationship with food became very difficult.

Concerned about her declining health and wellbeing, and desperate to seek the best possible healthcare, Emelia and her mum set off to Melbourne to visit an eating disorders expert whom they had seen on television. The doctor immediately referred Emelia to a psychologist, who officially diagnosed her with anorexia nervosa.

Throughout her decade-long battle with anorexia nervosa, Emelia has experienced two relapses, both of which have been triggered by clinical depression. Emelia says she turns to restrictive eating and excessive exercising as a coping mechanism when facing difficult challenges in her life.



Emelia is excited to be participating in the Eating Disorders Genetics Initiative (EDGI) – the world’s largest genetic investigation of eating disorders ever performed. The study is aiming to identify the hundreds of genes that influence a person’s risk of developing anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and binge-eating disorder to improve treatment, and ultimately, save lives. She hopes the study will shed further light on the genes that influence a person’s development of an eating disorder, and will offer hope to thousands of Australians currently living with these illnesses.

This is Emelia’s story.

After she chose to go on a diet at 24 years of age, Emelia says her life soon began to spiral out of control. She developed an intense fear of food, which, in the following six months, saw Emelia shed a dramatic amount of weight.

Together, flanked with the unrelenting love and help of her mum, Emelia travelled to Melbourne to secure much-needed professional advice from a leading eating disorders expert. After being subsequently referred to a psychologist, Emelia was diagnosed with the potentially devastating mental illness, anorexia nervosa,

The psychologist immediately started Emelia on a two-year-long stint of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) – a form of treatment designed to help change negative thoughts and behaviours by providing more positive and fulfilling solutions. During this time, Emelia says she also discovered invaluable resources on the internet, which helped inform her understanding of her illness.

“Originally, my eating disorder was triggered by depression, rather than a desire to lose weight.

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“When I’m in unhealthy relationships, or when I find myself in difficult circumstances, I begin to restrict my food intake and to exercise excessively to shut things out,” said Emelia.

After undergoing two years of CBT, Emelia says she emerged feeling very well, both physically and mentally. However, now 10 years post- diagnosis, she has experienced two recent relapses, both of which have involved a severe fear of food.

“Anorexia nervosa consumes my life. When it’s at its worst, I have a terrible fear of food, and it leaves me feeling incredibly depressed and disconnected.

“At one point, I was on the verge of being suicidal, because I couldn’t see a way out. No doctor could get through to me,” Emelia said.

With other women in Emelia’s family having also displayed disordered eating, Emelia strongly believes there is a genetic component to eating disorders.

“I don’t know how I’m capable of restricting my eating, but it feels biological to me. It is easier to not eat, than to eat,” said Emelia.

Emelia is proud to be participating in the Eating Disorders Genetics Initiative (EDGI) study, and encourages others with a history of eating disorders to volunteer.

“I urge Australians with experience of an eating disorder to volunteer for EDGI. If the EDGI researchers can find the specific genes that predispose people to developing an eating disorder, this will not only improve treatment, but provide those affected with a sense of relief from their disorder, in the long-term.

“Through science, people can hopefully feel less shame in dealing with this disorder, particularly for those who developed the disorder in adulthood,” Emelia said.

Should you suspect that you, or a loved one, may be living with an eating disorder, speak to your local healthcare professional without delay, or head to www.insideoutinstitute.org.au to complete their screener and assessment, and to access more information and professional support.

Australian professional patient support services offering 24/7 helpline services include:

- **Beyond Blue: 1300 22 4636**
- **LifeLine: 13 11 14**
- **Men’s Line Australia: 1300 78 99 78**
- **Kids Help Line: 1800 55 1800.**

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